

The  
Life-Work of  
Montaigne


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FROM THE RUSSIAN  
OF MEREJKOWSKI  
TRANSLATED BY . . .  
G. A. MOUNSEY . . .



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Wangold Phillips

Wick Hill, 1943.

Wang's Birds

Wang's Birds  
1943

MONTAIGNE



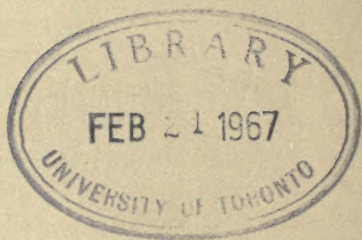
# THE LIFE-WORK OF MONTAIGNE

FROM THE RUSSIAN  
OF MEREJKOWSKI

BY  
G. A. MOUNSEY

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## MONTAIGNE

**I**N the work of Montaigne there is perhaps less suggestion of what is usually termed a philosophical system than in any other work of this nature. It is rather a collection of scattered observations ranging far and wide, a vast diary extending over the whole existence of the man, a motley mixture of unordered thoughts and notes, quotations, jokes and poems in prose, of anecdotes and chronicles and reminiscences. Not only does he expose to our view with the privilege enjoyed by every Heaven-born writer, the Holy of Holies of his heart, but he even shows us his study, his drawing room, and nursery, the sleeping chamber of his wife, the minute, prosaic details of his daily life, in a way in which even the purest and most virtuous of men would hesitate to picture them, and would experience a certain awkwardness, a feeling of apprehension in so

doing. As intrepidly as J. J. Rousseau in his Confessions, does he set before us his whole being, nor conceals a single fault, whether grave or petty, even to the ugliest vices, which men of sense are wont to hide away with jealous care. Little reckes he whether he seem good or evil, handsome or deformed, if only he be seen and comprehended. And yet, like a true artist, he is after all dissatisfied to find that the deeper and warmer side of his nature remains still unexpressed and covered by a mask.

In this detailed psychological self-analysis lies the whole philosophy of Montaigne. It has indeed all the elements of a harmonious system, if not metaphysical, at any rate social and æsthetic in character; there is full and marvellously finished material for a splendid structure. But Montaigne nourishes a deep dislike for superfluous symmetry; he is over fond of what is natural and unscientific. He prefers to leave the material of his thought in that undisturbed form in which he has received it from the hands of Nature and of Life. One may compare the Essays of Montaigne to a densely tangled forest, overgrown and wildly beautiful, wherein one

roaming would easily go astray. Line and colour, the play of light and shade, the forms of plants and flowers, the song of birds, all here are natural, unruly and subject to no ordered law. At sight of these mighty trees intermingling their branches, the mind of a philosopher-builder would be no doubt beset with all manner of practical suggestions: it would be well to cut down these trees, and saw them into planks or beams and then, in accordance with all the rules of architectural science, build up the symmetrical structure of a metaphysical system, where all is clear and requires no explanation, where there is no possibility of going astray. But Montaigne has chosen a dense wood, uncleared by paths or glades. Instinctively he feels that behind this outward disorder and lack of harmony there is concealed another and higher harmony and sense of unity. He has realised that the flowing of the sap through the blades of grass, the branching of the roots, the formation of a leaf—in a word, all the unconscious natural processes of organic development are sometimes more perfect than the work of the subtlest and most complicated

instruments of men. It is impossible to enter the structure of his point of view without doing it some injury, without spoiling the cement and soldering which are essential to all such edifices. One can only name the chief constructive elements of his philosophy or define the chief species of the innumerable plants and flowers which are to be met with in his wood. And it is as well to give warning beforehand that it is impossible to convey the æsthetic impression of this wood with any justice.

Doubt is no path to Montaigne, and is no goal. With him it is never raised to a supreme all-pervading principle as it is with Pyrrho, with whom in other respects Montaigne has much in common,—his scepticism being no more than a simple attitude of mind, a natural disposition. He is in doubt about all things, but from the purely theoretical point of view; and he is so in the name of no inviolable principle, but in the name of the negation of all principles, of every doctrine. He was born a sceptic, he did not become one. By nature he was a man of a peaceful, well-balanced temperament; by social position, he was a seigneur, a landed

proprietor ; but in his tastes he was a dilettante. It was peculiarly easy for him to be impartial and a stranger to all enthusiasm and exaggeration, for Fate had freed him from all necessity of taking part in the real struggle of life, in which peril and the instinct of self-preservation and the forces of love and hatred inspire man with faith while they restrict his vision, and to some degree narrow his point of view. Viewing life eternally from the depthless well of his purely French and joyous nature, and through the medium of his healthy and essentially human thought, he studied the comic side of all those enthusiasms and exaggerations so intimately that he was no longer himself in any danger of falling into the toils. If he has no strong convictions, neither has he any prejudices ; if he is a stranger to genuine faith, he is also a stranger to all superstition. The ultimate aim of his scepticism lies in this, that he may make clear to his reader the reason which makes him personally incapable of joining any party, of following any sect or any school.

In other ways, in his habitual fleeting manner and without any sort of system, he

indicates some few of the objective sources of doubt. The first is the recognition of the vastness of the world, of the endless changes of worldly phenomena, and of the utter insignificance of mankind. "Pride is a natural, inborn and nature-given disease. Man is the most miserable and frail of all creatures, and the most arrogant withal; realising that he dwells in squalor and uncleanness, chained down to the most evil, and lifeless parts of the world's edifice, to the cellar floor of the universe, furthest removed from Heaven, in the society of beasts and reptiles, he still sets himself above the stars in his pride, and treads Heaven under foot." Who has bestowed on him this right? He can discern but a tiny corner of the earth, and yet from this infinitely small portion, he dares to pass judgment upon the whole.

This, then, is the first source of his scepticism, the narrow sphere of those phenomena which are within the reach of our observation, and the limited degree within which we are capable of realising them.

The second source is the full and inevitable dependance of all thought upon emotion, and

of all enquiry, upon the perpetually changing nature of the subjective enquirer. "We think," says Montaigne, "only what we wish to think, and only for as long a season as it pleases us so to think. Like the hide of the chameleon, our essential nature alters beneath the influence of surrounding conditions. . . . Man is incarnate fluctuation and instability."

*Ducimur ut nervis alienis mobile lignum.*

(*i.e.*, We move like automata). We move not of our own accord, but allow ourselves to be carried away, like objects borne along by a stream, now slowly, now in a turmoil, according to the turbulence or calmness of the bubbling water. . . . We are ever wavering between two counsels, we desire nothing peaceful, nothing absolute, nothing permanent. "So unstable are my feet, they move on a quicksand that menaces me with imminent destruction; my sight is so uncertain that I see quite differently when hungry, or after a good meal; if I am well and the weather is fine, I am always cheery and affable, but if troubled even by corns, I become morose and nasty and unsociable. In spite of innumerable and intangible physical influences, the majority

of qualities, such, for instance, as conceit, self-interest, personal gain, enmity and love alter our judgments at their pleasure, carry us to every opposite extreme, and violate our sense of justice and impartiality." "For instance, you place some business matter in the hands of a lawyer ; he gives you an indefinite, careless opinion ; you feel that he is quite cold in the matter, and would support one side or the other with equal indifference. But try making him a small gift of money, and immediately he will take the liveliest interest ; he grows enthusiastic, inclines his wavering mind in your favour, he brings his whole intelligence and all his knowledge to bear on the business and all at once the whole unvarnished truth dawns upon him ; he is convinced, to some extent sincerely, forcing you also to believe in the justice of your case. "The mind of man is unstable and changeable ; unable to keep to any one thing, it wavers and wanders hither and thither eternally

*Velut minuta magno*

*Deprensa navis in mari vesaniente vento.*

(Like a helpless skiff tossed on the mighty ocean by a furious storm).



Men have never been able to agree as to the real meaning of good; one ancient writer, Barron, enumerates some thousand sects who are divided on this one question of the highest good; philosophy presents an endless multitude of tendencies and schools, of diverse and irreconcilable sects, who raise the absurdest phantasies on to the pedestal of perfect truth. In them may be found expressed the utmost flights of the human imagination. *Nihil tam absurde dici potest, quod non dicatur ab aliquo philosophorum* (i.e. It is impossible to utter any absurdity which has not at some time been upheld by some philosopher). But if no man knows what is his own good, because each one interprets the quality exclusively and subjectively, if no man knows what is his own mind, because the mind is of the essence of greatness, impermanent, and eternally changing; if no man knows what is his own will, because it seems to bend merely to innumerable and arbitrary influences—in a word, if a man does not know his own nature, what is there in the rest of the world that he is capable of knowing? Was not the philosopher Pythagoras making fun of us

when he included man in the measure of things? Man, who knows not even his own measure! Did not the sage wish merely to point out that there is not, and never could be any guiding principle in us, nor any leading thread in the chaos of our incoherent impressions?

The doubt of Montaigne is distinguished by one characteristic trait, which gives his scepticism a touch of originality that makes it unlike the mental attitude of any other philosopher. His doubts are, essentially, of a cheerful nature and full of the love of life. Only theoretically and in light and superficial vein does he destroy the prejudices and superstitions of centuries gone by. In the historic epoch in which Montaigne wrote, scepticism was but just cutting its teeth; it was Hercules, as yet unconscious of his strength. Doubt had not yet acquired its venom of compassion. Despite the boldness of his theoretical views, Montaigne, who was the sincerest man in the world, considered himself in all good faith and simplicity, a faithful son of the Catholic Church and a faithful subject to the King of France; during his whole life, suspecting nothing,

he played with fire on the very top of the powder-mine.

We have already partly noted the logical foundation of his scepticism. He was quick to understand the wordy emptiness of metaphysical discussions. "Our questions," says Montaigne, "consist of empty words, and the replies are similar. Suppose you affirm that a stone is a body. Anyone who is continuing the argument will ask 'But what is a body?'" "A substance." "But what is substance?" will reduce you at last to the impossibility of reply. One word is turned into another, often into a much more incomprehensible one. I know better what part of man is mortal or intelligent, than I do with regard to animals. In trying to remove one doubt, they introduce three new ones; it is like the Hydra of Lernæ." ("There is nothing permanent, nothing fixed," he cries in another place, "either in nature or ourselves; and we ourselves and all our judgments and all finite things flow onwards and change perpetually in our instability. Nothing exists that is unchangeable, nor is there any constant relation between our thoughts and the external world, seeing that

the observer and that which is observed both find themselves in a state of perpetual change and instability. *Que sais-je?*" The question which has become the device of Montaigne expresses excellently in two words the sceptical attitude of his mind.

"At the present time," says Montaigne, "we are more engaged in explaining explanations than occupied with the explanations of things themselves; and there are more books in the world that treat of books than of any other subject. We have learned to note down observation after observation. Commentaries are to be bought everywhere now, very rarely the authors themselves. To take in what is taught us, that is the chief and loftiest science of our time, that is the universal and final goal of all our endeavours. The first of these opinions forms a step up to the second, the second to the third, and so on in such a manner that we ascend the stairway by slow degrees, imagining that we have reached the summit: whereas he who stands upon the top is hardly on a higher level than those who stand upon the first step. We only cumber our memory, our intellect and conscience remaining void.

“Just as birds carry a seed by holding it in their beaks without swallowing it in order to convey it to their little ones, so do our pedants peck out some scrap of learning from their books, and place this food upon the very edge of their lips with the sole object of simply dropping it out of their mouths in public view of all men.” “And their disciples are equally ignorant how to swallow their food, and therefore hand it on to the succeeding generation; so that ultimately it is transferred from one to the other in vain and to no purpose, for mere amusement or ostentation. Science appeals now only to men of mediocre intelligence, who are guided by low and material considerations. She has lost her lofty mission of disclosing the meaning of life, of showing humanity the road to moral perfection.” “All the care and labours of our fathers have effected only this, that they have, so to say, furnished our heads with the most varied information; of intelligence or virtue no one has thought at all.”

Montaigne applies his scepticism, not merely to the theoretical side of human action, but to the practical side as well.

He has strong doubts as to the justice of the existing social inequalities. "A hunting-hound is valued according to its swiftness, and not by its collar; a falcon by its wings, and not by its cry. Wherefore then do we not estimate man by that which constitutes a part of himself? He may have sumptuous garments, a magnificent palace, good credit, a large income, but all these things are about him, and not within himself." Dispassionately, though from a practical point of view, and without any special virulence, the philosopher attacks the authority of kings: "Look at the king, who blinds you by his might and glory; when the curtain falls, he is the most ordinary of men, and often less than the least of his subjects. . . . Pusillanimity, indecision, ambition, malice, envy sway him as they sway all other men :

*Non enim gazæ, neque consularis  
Summovet lictor miseros tumultus  
Mentis, et curas laqueata circum  
Tecta volantes.*

(No riches nor consular rank can remove the black thoughts and cares which perch under gilded roofs.)

“And Fear and Danger clutch at Cæsar’s throat even in the midst of his warrior host. Care does not fear the noise and glitter of arms . . . . nor do fever, headache or gout spare a monarch sooner than they would spare any one of us simple mortals. And when old age begins to press upon his shoulders, can his guards posted at the gate protect him? When fear of Death oppresses him, can his courtiers help him to escape? When he has ceased to live among us, will our servile salutations bring him any spiritual repose? The curtains round his bed, embroidered in gold and pearls, possess no particle of power to soothe his sufferings in time of illness. The poet Hermodor composed some verses in honour of Antigone, in which he called Alexander the offspring of the Sun. To which Cæsar replied: ‘He who issues from the cauldron of my body bears witness that thou art mistaken.’ Some flatterers endeavoured to convince Alexander of his divine descent, but one day, when wounded, he pointed to his wound, and shewing them the blood which was oozing from it, said: ‘Behold, will you continue to argue, seeing this? Is not this ordinary human blood?’

And has it any resemblance to that which, in the words of Homer, flowed from the wounds of the Gods?'"

Montaigne goes as far as to question the very nature of laws and of dominion. Laws must embody permanent and irrevocable norms, whilst the actions of mankind are eternally changeable and varying; for it is evident that, by its mere imposition, no single juridical norm can fully coincide with, and embrace any one single form of human activity; for some element which is incommensurable with existing laws must always remain. And it is this element which occasions the recourse to the arbitration of judges. "The rarest and the most general laws are those which are most needed. Yet, methinks that it would be better to have none at all than to have laws in the profusion in which we have them now. Natural laws are always more just than those which we draw up; and to this the poets' representation of the Golden Age bears witness, as does the happy condition of the newly-discovered races who have no kind of governmental organisation." Laws in Montaigne's estimation are deserving of respect, not because



they are just, but for the simple reason that they are laws. On this and on no other basis lies the mystic foundation of their authority. Often, may be, they are drawn up by fools, more often still by men who, hating equality, have no conception of equity, but always by men, that is, by vain and ignorant creatures. There exists no more glaring inequality than that which has its origin in laws. "Think of the effect of the laws which govern us," he cries in another place, "what a monument of human stupidity they present!—how much that they contain is contradictory and false! That which we are accustomed to call the mercy and the rigour of the laws is but a miserable, unequal principle in the very heart, in the very essence of equity." "What can be more wonderful than the sight of a whole nation bound by laws, submitting to laws, about which no one has ever spoken to it? In all their domestic affairs, in marriage, in the transmission of property, in the rights of succession, in purchase and sale, it is fettered by rules which it has no possibility of understanding, because they are not published in its native tongue."

Montaigne laughs at the importance attached to so-called affairs of State. With infinite pomp and ceremony they gather together the wisest men of the kingdom in solemn meetings, for the discussion of the gravest matters, the decision of which depends in truth entirely on the caprice of some fascinating woman, or else on the intrigues of a lady's boudoir. And so it all too often happens that regulations imposed in this manner come to weigh upon the heads of whole nations.

Montaigne's scepticism extends even to religion. He struggles indeed conscientiously to sever his Catholic faith from his general attitude of sceptical negation, though he does not always succeed in so doing. Thus for instance he has a whole chapter dedicated to an ingenious, learned and fascinating apology for suicide, which from the point of view of Catholic morality constitutes one of the greatest of sins.

Reasoning on a theoretic basis, he regards death as the liberating influence from all troubles, a view that is not entirely in accordance with the Christian teaching, which condemns all sinners after death to the

torments of Hades. Just as our birth is to us the birth of the whole world, so the death of the whole world will be our death also. And therefore it is as foolish to complain that in a hundred years' time we shall not exist, as it is that a hundred years ago we did not exist. Only from very nebulous and undefined representations of the future life can one construct such soothing syllogisms, which exhale a purely pagan, pre-Christian materialism.

Hear how Montaigne describes himself: "I am idle and lazy both by nature and by conviction. Little do I care that men are willing to shed their blood for some special cause, or sacrifice their life for a certain object. My soul is free, a slave to no man, and accustomed ever to follow its own dictates; being to this day ruled by no man, knowing no power above me, I have wandered whither I listed, I have lived as I pleased. This existence has weakened me, and the impossibility in which I stood of aiding others has left me no alternative but to think only of myself." In the sum of his expenditure on household administration he includes also the amount which according to

his calculations will be stolen by his slaves. "It does not interest me to know how much money I have at every moment of the day, in order to realise the better what my expenses have been. I beg my servants, if by chance they cannot serve me honestly and conscientiously, at least to deceive me and to keep up decent appearances." He feels positively incapable of going into the affairs of daily life, or of undertaking any prolonged labour, that would require his systematic and undivided attention. He is as helpless and inexperienced in the details of daily life — as a child, as was Oblomov. He knows not how to make the simplest calculations, has no idea of the value of large sums of money, cannot distinguish between one sort of grain and another, nor can he name the most ordinary agricultural implements, fruits, cattle, vegetables, nor estimate the value of ordinary wares. With some slight confusion, not unmingled with a certain coquettishness he confesses: "Only lately have I learnt how bread is made and how they ferment wine. If I only live long enough," says he, derisively, "I shall, in time, forget my own name." Like a true aristocrat, he never

attempts to conceal his deep aversion to questions connected with money. "Oh, contemptible profession," he cries, "this pursuit of income, this counting and recounting of monies, this weighing and worshipping them. For thus does avarice glide furtively into our hearts." But still he hates poverty, and fears it no less than illness or suffering.

He would like to be surrounded by all manner of luxuries and comforts, which should surround him always without his having to concern himself about the means of securing them. He had many of the thousand little unpretentious tastes or fancies of a seigneur country gentleman. He required that his glass should be made of diaphanous material, and never of metal, that it should be of a certain shape, and handed to him, not by any chance servant, but by his own lackey. So much of a sybarite did he become, that he commanded his slaves to awaken him several times during the night, simply because this interrupted sleep was more delicious.

Montaigne passed the greater part of his life on his family estate, in his ancestral castle. Not he alone, but several generations

of his forefathers had found they had no need to follow any profession or make any effort of will. Picture this peaceful existence, free from all motion, like the surface of a transparent mountain lake. Quietly and pleasantly life flows by in his ancestral castle, where from the spacious windows of his study are visible the golden summits of the hills of Perigord, bearing idleness and reflection on their breezes. Time is pleasantly divided between walking, converse with his friends, and his library. Nature and country life and philosophy combine to convert his existence into a peaceful gentle slumber. It would be hard to imagine a conjunction of conditions more favourable to the development of this type of effeminate Epicurean, lacking all will, all taste for work, and entirely unable to give himself up passionately to anything at all. From the combination born of his inherited temperament, and measured self-control, added to his great internal activity of thought and talent, there emerges that philosophy peculiar to Montaigne which may be called Dilettantism.

It is easy to trace the basis of this dilettantism in the slightest workings of his mind, as, for instance, in his manner of observing :

“If they wish me to make any reply, the question must be presented to me bit by bit (*à parcelles*), as I am incapable of answering a set speech with a few disjointed theses, and unless I wrote it down, I could not keep in my mind the answer I would wish to make.” His memory, like all his other faculties, is over-burdened by such a continuous effort.

This is his system of reading: “I study now one book, now another, without any kind of order or sequence; I just glance through them as they come under my hand. Sometimes I wander from books to dreams, then again I dictate whatever comes into my head.” “Books are pleasant,” he observes, “but if they become so absorbing as to affect our health and happiness, which are our most valuable possessions, then it is better to throw away our books.”

With the same dilettantism does he regard mankind: “I am in search of honest, sensible men. . . . It is really all the same what we talk about . . . we certainly shall not probe deeply into serious and difficult subjects, but grace and propriety ornament our conversation; while it will be coloured with a calm and searching judgment, charity, open-mindedness

and amity." Very rarely did they indulge in their discussions in any philosophical arguments, and even when they did so, they never produced too deep or oppressive an impression; for their chief object was the pleasant whiling away of time. "Nous n'y cherchons qu'à passer le temps."

Death, even, he regards from a boisterous and life-loving point of view, and almost turns it, like all else, into a pleasure and delight. Here one feels the protest against the asceticism of the middle ages; in this frivolous, careless form of reasoning one feels the breath of the Renaissance. There is something of greatness in the careless and indolent smile with which Don Juan extends his hand to his stony guest.

Montaigne strives to surround death with the same refined comfort. "I desire," he says, "to find myself in a peaceful spot, removed from all noise, pleasant, free from all oppression, full of fresh air, such as will soften Death with all necessities of external comfort. . . . I desire that my end may be attended by the same comfortable ease and content that have attended my life. Death is a great and important part of our existence,



and I trust that it will not prove a contrast to the rest of my life. There are different sorts of deaths, of which some are more pleasant than others, and every man may select that death which is according to his own taste . . . He carefully compares and weighs the many different forms of Death, in the spirit of a true connoisseur, as though it were a question of choosing out a good wine, or a work of art. He considers it most agreeable to die as people died under the Roman Empire. "They seemed to put Death to sleep, as it were, with all kinds of luxury and delicacy ; it flowed or glided by them amid a throng of young maidens and joyful comrades ; no half-whispered words of consolation were heard, no allusions made to wills, no assumed expressions of sympathy, no discussion of the life beyond the tomb ; but they encountered Death in the midst of their banquets and games, their jests and daily society, their music and love-sonnets."

Montaigne not only never in his life felt any remorse of conscience on account of his attitude of diletantism, but on the contrary he even raised it to be the loftiest principle of his whole philosophy. Just as in the

theoretical domain he chose as his motto the well-known "Que sais-je?", so in the practical sphere he rejoiced in the formula: "Je ne cherche qu'à passer." And both these mottoes are united in their inner significance, and constitute merely two sides of the same point of view.

"My mind is so constructed that blows and shocks, produced by indecision and wavering, agitate it more than the necessity of resigning myself and accepting a decision taken. Few emotions disturb my slumbers, but the slightest worry about my work prevents me from sleeping. In travelling I avoid slippery slopes and steep ascents, and prefer to go in the beaten tracks, which even though they be muddy and dirty do not at least entail the risk of my falling lower; and in them at any rate I can feel in perfect safety. The lowest path is also the most full of hope and the longest. In choosing this path I have only myself to hope and to work for."

It may be said at once that such a condition of mind as this must reflect a deep conservatism in both his social and political views. As we have already seen, Montaigne

has grave doubts as to the justice of the existing social order of things, but these doubts not only do not lead him to revolutionary deductions, but, on the contrary, he demands an absolute and unreasoning submission to the powers that be, on the principle that "every change brings in its wake still greater evil." "One thing alone—thought—(that is the freedom from a theoretical scepticism relating to everything) is not subservient to the despotic administration, but in all things else, in our acts, our work, our property, our life, we must submit to the Government and to public opinion."

"There is in my opinion in social matters no single institution so evil but that if it only have behind it an historical past, it is better than a change or innovation of any sort."

Montaigne is a conservative, not from fear of power, not from any personal interest, not out of any petty considerations, nor indeed from any partisan or selfish hatred of men of contrary views; he is a conservative, because he has genuine and serious doubts as to the efficacy of any fundamental reforms for the France of his day. His education, his temperament, his peaceful and inactive

habits, all internal and external influences combine to endow his mental attitude with a peculiar harmony, which enables him "to move in his accustomed groove."

The conservatism of Montaigne is also explained by the historical conditions of the epoch. "Look," says the author, "at the distant provinces, such as Brittany, look at the life there, at the relations towards servants and retainers, at the professions, occupations, suite and ceremonial of any seigneur dwelling alone among his vassals and domestic servants. Look also at the extent of his imaginative development: it goes not beyond the thought of ruling. He hears once a year of his king, as of the Shah of Persia, and he concedes consequently only to him, in virtue of his ancient descent, an authority of which he has constituted himself the Secretary. Our laws are indeed fairly free, and the French lord of the soil does not feel the weight of the autocratic government more than twice during the course of his life. Real slavery is endured only by those who themselves choose it, and hope by this means to attain honours and wealth, but anyone who desires to lead a domestic life,

and who will administer his property without quarrelling or lawsuits, is left as free as the Doge of Venice. "Paucos servitus plures servitatem." "If," says he in another place, "the laws to which I submit were to oppress me in any degree, however slight, I should immediately depart to another country, and go in search of other laws." And thus the actual existing order of things, the injustices which moreover he himself acknowledges, do not in any way infringe his own personal liberty.

All reform and innovation were for Montaigne inextricably bound up with the idea of family warfare, pillage, violence, the rule of pure anarchy and the might of the sword. The strength of the king and the centralisation of the administration seemed to him to be eminently desirable as a safeguard against the lawlessness and violence of mediæval barbarism, from the terrors of which he had had occasion to suffer. "In the general chaos in which we have been living for the past thirty years, every Frenchman may expect his ruin at any moment." Twice during the period of his wanderings did he fall into the hands of bandits, and only saved

himself by a kind of miracle. By broad daylight he is exposed to the attacks of his neighbour, a country proprietor just like himself. The author refers to this attack as to an ordinary, every-day occurrence. Bands of robbers used at that time to roam unhindered, about the public roads. Family feuds were dragged on year after year, without bringing any improvement, or producing any result whatever, and the robbers took shelter under the banners of the political and religious parties, in order to hide their misdeeds. The best known types of that period are Catherine de Medici, Guise, Charles IX. and Henry the Third. Demoralisation was not confined to the Court, but had spread abroad to an extent unknown heretofore even in the depths of the country. The bloodstained terrors of the night of Saint Bartholomew were to a greater or less degree reflected throughout all the cities of France. The life of Montaigne is passed at one of the saddest, most dreary periods of his country's history; during the period of the second half of the sixteenth century blood was spilt in no less than seven religious wars. The struggle between Medici and Guise, between Valois

and Bourbon, between Protestants and Catholics, between a dissolute clergy and a no less demoralised administration, threatened to destroy the uttermost foundations of the social and moral edifice of society, and to reduce France to a state of primæval barbarism.

At such times there remain only two courses open to honest and upright men. Either they must turn their heads aside, and forgetting all personal interests, hurl themselves into the political strife, sacrificing their lives for their cause, as did Admiral Coligny, the brilliant leader of the Huguenots, who suffered a piteous death at the hands of a murderer, and so never witnessed the success of his magnificent plans. Or else, if one experience a repugnance to this internecine warfare, which only grows more acute with years, and never comes to any end, despairing of the possibility of introducing the much-needed political reforms, one comes gradually to avoid all strife, to reject all change and innovation, to demand of society only peace, peace at all costs, even if purchased at the price of submission to wretchedly bad, though firmly fixed and definite laws.

Montaigne was by his education and temperament incapable of choosing the first of these two courses; to play the man, to become a combatant and a hero. And so he necessarily selects the second course, that demanding the re-establishment of order, the maintenance of the ancient principles of government, *i.e.* despotism and conservatism. The authority of the king did not interfere with the personal liberty of the nobility of that day; it had not as yet come to be considered as a synonym for despotism and oppression. That is the reason why Montaigne adhered to his monarch's cause, and also why he continued to reverence the Roman Catholic Church, as being the one emblem of social order amid the general chaos, and of peace amid the endless strife.

✓ But in the conservatism of Montaigne there is nothing fantastic, nothing intolerant. It is nothing more than a passive attitude towards party strife, a historical inability to construct a great all-reconciling social ideal, and the sudden and passionate thirst of an exhausted, worn-out man, the thirst for rest.

“Whoever realises his own human worth,” says Montaigne, “has learnt his duty to other



men, has recognised his mission to work in common for the common welfare, by performing the duties of a citizen. He who lives not for others, lives also not for his own self: *qui sibi amicus est, scito hunc amicum omnibus esse*. Every man has his own work to do; this is our chief mission, and for this it is that we are alive."

There is also another side to the scepticism which has led Montaigne in the sphere of politics to his intense conservatism, and this is his toleration. Herein is to be found one of the chief merits of the philosopher, one of his immortal services. In the extreme heat of fanatical hostility, perfect system and doctrine can be as useful and welcome as an oath of tolerance, and a rejection of narrow systems and doctrines. The ability not to believe in this age of rude fanaticism was as precious and beneficent as is the ability to believe in our own age of scepticism. Montaigne's inclination is to keep aloof from butchery and bloodshed, to remain cold in face of contests in logic and discussions of theory, and in face of the narrow political hatreds and party strife to preserve his simplicity of intellect, and thus he showed

himself all through life to be possessed of nobility of thought, of noble and just views devoid of all religious enthusiasm, while he upheld as far as was possible in that age the principles of tolerance and moderation.

“All human calamities,” says Montaigne, “result from the fact that we are made to feel ashamed of confessing our ignorance, and so we are compelled to accept in good faith everything that we cannot in substance disprove; on every subject we have grown accustomed to speak in dogmas and commandments. . . . But I hate all confessions of belief when they are given out as incontrovertible. I love those words which - mitigate the harshness of our judgments: ‘perhaps,’ ‘Well, suppose’; or vaguely ‘they say,’ ‘I suppose,’ ‘Imagine’ . . . Philosophy begins in astonishment, develops by means of research, and ends in agnosticism.” This conviction of his own ignorance is nothing else than tolerance. He who is persuaded of his own ignorance will never dare to persecute any other man for the convictions he may hold. In these few words is expressed in a concise formula the fundamental attitude of Montaigne—that

which in the case of other philosophers who are more of doctrinaires than he, might be called his system; philosophy begins with astonishment, that is the slavery of thought; it advances to research, that is to scepticism and negation; and it finally attains the realisation of its own ignorance, that is to say tolerance, and consequently freedom of thought.

The great sceptic had the manliness and independence to say openly to his excessively cruel age: "A man places far too high a value upon his own opinions, if he can send people to the stake in defence of them." "Obstinacy and vehemence of opinion," says he with bitterness, "are the surest signs of stupidity; what can be more obstinate, stubborn, stupid, heavy and serious than an ass?" He was the first and only man to use against superstition that most dangerous weapon of derision. Even towards men who were hateful to him, intolerant doctrinaires and fanatics, he strives to behave with magnanimity. "Stupidity is an undesirable quality; but to treat it with impatience, to advance to meet it in a rage, is another form of disease no less unpleasant than stupidity

itself . . . I associate with those whom I find sympathetic in disposition, and so I can discuss with the greater ease and freedom, inasmuch as arguments find in me a soil into which it is very hard for them to penetrate and take deep root; no hypotheses surprise me, no form of belief shocks me, however much opposed it may be to my own views; no fancy can be so eccentric and senseless as not to enable me to realise that it is a wholly natural product of the mind of man. We men, who do not allow our own minds the right to form fixed and definite judgments, gaze gloomily and from the lowest point of view at all the various opinions of others. And so it is that I do not regard contradictions of my views as being acts inspired by hostility or dislike to myself, for on the contrary, they wake me up, and force me to think. We avoid retorts, and yet it would be well for us to cultivate and welcome them with joy, more especially when they are only suggested, and not forced violently upon us as faultless dogmas. When any one disagrees with us, we set about to consider, not whether he is right, but rather how we may evade his arguments even at

the cost of truth. Instead of accepting them with open arms, we fight against them with the utmost irritation. I shall be delighted if my friends would say sharply to me: "You are a fool, you are talking nonsense." I love straightforward people, who give vent to their opinions openly and boldly, their words following in the wake of their thoughts; we must strengthen our weak understanding, and steep it in hatred of greasy adulation. . . . When I am contradicted, my attention is aroused but not my anger; I advance to meet him who is contradicting me, who is *Even* instructing me; interest in the truth should be the main interest on both sides. . . . What can he reply? Exasperation would deprive him of the ability to judge impartially, excitement would overcome his power of reasoning. . . . In whatever hands I encounter the truth, I greet it with joy and welcome it, I surrender gladly, and defeated hand over my weapons as soon as I perceive it from afar. And if men argue from a non-doctrinaire point of view, it is a great pleasure to me that they do not agree with me, and I even very often agree with my adversaries more out of a feeling of gratitude for their

answer, than because I admit its correctness, simply in order to show how sincerely I uphold perfect freedom of discussion and contradiction."

The feudal and ecclesiastical conditions of the middle ages seemed almost purposely calculated to crush all personality, and to nip in the bud every attempt at its development. "Men," says Montaigne, "let themselves out to hire; thus their talents serve not themselves, but him to whom they have subjected themselves . . . . These universal conditions are repulsive to me . . . . One must preserve one's liberty of spirit . . . .

— No man strews his money about with no return, and yet every one gives away to others his time and life. With them we are more liberal than we are with anything else, especially at a time when we ought in this one respect to be parsimonious." "Look at a soldier, filled with ardour; though riddled with the enemy's bullets, he climbs up the crumbling wall into the besieged city; then look at another, who, blood-stained, exhausted, and pale with hunger, has firmly determined to die rather than open the gate to the foe; do you imagine these men are

working for themselves? Not so, they serve a man whom they have most likely never seen, who will never hear of their exploits; while they are toiling for him, he is revelling in idleness and luxury." Montaigne urges men to look within themselves, to liberate themselves from their herding instincts; he denies their right to sacrifice their life and happiness as citizens to the administration.

He warns men to fly from the aimless vanities of life, from the universal pursuit of fame, wealth and luxury, from the despotism of the ruling government. One must strive also for internal freedom. Though dwelling in complete solitude, man may equally remain a slave to his prejudices and his passions. "Frequently do these follow us into the monastery and schools of philosophy: no desert, no cave, no chains, no couch can save us from them . . . We must ourselves regain our self-control . . . We must keep within our souls a free refuge, unshared by any one, wherein we may ever find solitude and asylum. In this refuge must we commune with ourselves in silence and concealment, so that no man may overhear us; here we can be reasonable, and here we can

smile; nor be influenced by anything, by wife, by child, by property, or land, or servants; so that if by chance we were deprived of all these things, the loss of them would seem not unexpected to us. We possess a soul that is able to concentrate itself within itself, whose own society is sufficient for itself. In its inner world it finds out what to attack and what to defend, what to accept and what to give away. In this solitude we need fear neither boredom nor yet idleness.

*In solis sis tibi turba locis.*

(i.e. "In solitude be a crowd to thyself.")

"We have freed ourselves from those fits of passion which seize hold of, and alienate us from our work within ourselves. We must burst these strong chains asunder. Perhaps we may in time get to attach ourselves to the spiritual side of things, but to surrender oneself entirely, is the highest blessing of one's personality. . . . . The greatest thing in the world is to understand how to belong to oneself alone. We must withdraw from society if we consider that we can be of no service to it. Let him not receive, who cannot give in turn. If our



powers grow faint, let us preserve them and concentrate them upon ourselves.”

This is not egoism, it is no uncompromising attitude towards mankind. The philosopher loves men and values their society, and if he flies to his solitude, he does so out of no feeling of hostility, but from love of peace—strengthened by the knowledge that under existing conditions of society, peace among men is an impossibility. “I am,” says he, “by nature very sociable and frank; I love to speak openly, I cannot keep anything concealed. I was made for society and friendship. The solitude which I preach consists in turning to the true interest of your personality your scattered thoughts and sympathies, in order to make a boundary, and as far as possible confine within it not the circle of vision, but all wordly toils and cares, to thrust from yourself all that is foreign and useless to you, to fear, as one fears death, all slavery and constraint, in a word to avoid worries rather than men. Solitude, indeed, rather widens my circle of vision, and makes me still more sociable. When I am alone, I am easily carried away by my interest in society and the affairs of the world.”

Apart from his love of solitude, he possesses an abundance of tenderness and purely feminine sensitiveness for the sufferings of others. "Of all the vices," he says, "I hate cruelty the most, both from inborn instinct and by conviction." And the sufferings of animals affect him just as much as those of mankind. "I am intensely sensitive to the sorrows of others, and am ready myself to weep when I see tears not only in real life, but even in a picture or on the stage. I cannot calmly behold an execution, however justly it may have been deserved."

For the soldier whom his country sends out to die: for the scholar who makes his old age miserable in order to "discover the true orthography of some Latin word," for the monk, weighed down by strict rules, Montaigne lays down the great principle that: "Every man's duty is to love himself," not with that false and vicious love which induces us ever to search for glory, scholarly learning and wealth, and prizes all these things unduly as a part of our existence, nor indeed with that superstitious feeling of self-love which, like ivy, suffocates and destroys everything to which it attaches

itself, but with a love that is true and noble, that brings with it as its one advantage, permanent benefit and happiness. Whoever recognises and fulfils his duty towards this love is indeed a servant of the Muses, he reaches the perfection of human wisdom, and of those blessings, the attainment of which is open to us all. At the same time, he who realises his own human worth understands also his duties towards other men."

Montaigne looks calmly and confidently upon the world and upon mankind; he is the first and only man in modern history to throw off the nightmare of the middle ages. With what enthusiasm does he launch into the new field of thought, freed once and for all from the slavery of scholasticism. "It is wrong to picture philosophy with ugly and sour features, as being all inaccessible to children; who is it that has clothed her in such a pale and unattractive garb? There is nothing more cheerful and happy and bright, I was almost saying frivolous, than the true wisdom; she encourages pleasure and luxury; if you see frightened, mournful faces, be assured that she dwells not among those people."

“The soul that feeds upon philosophy must by its healthiness impart to the body courage and strength ; its internal peace and happiness must shine forth with that brilliancy in which a noble pride is combined with an active and joyful nobility, with contentment and with peace. The truest sign of wisdom is a constantly peaceful disposition of mind, a temperament as clear and unclouded as the quiet, starry heaven. Its mission is to calm the storms of the spirit with no lying sophisms, but by simple and tangible proof ; its aim is that beneficence which dwells not upon the perpendicular mountain-side, steep and unattainable, as the scholastics would have us believe. No, indeed, those who have succeeded in reaching it declare that it lies in a charming plain, fruitful and carpeted with flowers, whence it beholds the world laid bare at its feet. One may reach its dwelling by shady paths fringed with scented flowers and joyous with the hum of bees, along a gentle and scarce perceptible incline, like the path to heaven. They have never experienced this virtue, the loftiest, the most solemn, most tender and yet most powerful ; they have never perceived that irrecon-

cilable contrast of strife and noise and fear and violence, the guide to which is Nature herself, whose friends are happiness and ease; and that is why they in their mediocrity have conjured up this image, this mournful, malicious, quarrelsome and menacing danger, and have placed it on an impregnable rock, amid prickly thorns, a monstrosity, constructed for the purpose of terrifying people."

This page is permeated with the spirit of the Renaissance. Mighty Pan has arisen; risen also is the ancient feeling for Nature and the joy of life. "Virtue," cries Montaigne, "is the nurse of all human joys; she makes them just, and therefore genuine and pure; and when she dies, she preserves their youthful freshness and strength; depriving us of some, she enhances our pleasure in the rest, and with motherly tenderness allows us a full satisfaction, if not satiety, in the enjoyment of such pleasures as Nature permits. She loves, she loves beauty and glory and health."

Montaigne is an optimist, but like most of his philosophical utterances, his optimism does not show itself in a perfected system, but rather in his predominating tone, in the

sunny depth of his manner of looking at the world. In speaking of grief, Montaigne observes, "I, more than any other man, am a stranger to this passion; I love it not, neither do I reverence it, although it is generally considered right to show all possible honour to grief. Wisdom, virtue and conscience are adorned with grief—a stupid and sordid ornament!"

Like a true Hellene, he regards all human existence as bright and beautiful; not the spirit alone, but the body also. "Of this gift (that is our body) bestowed on us by God, there is no single portion which is not worthy of our utmost care, and we are bound to give account of it to our Creator even unto the uttermost hair." "I cannot say how much I admire beauty, that powerful and blessed force." Socrates called it "a short-lived tyranny"; Plato "a privilege of Nature." Indeed there is no other privilege that is more popular among men; it holds the first place in social life, it comes before all other treasures, it charms and adorns our mind." "Not only among men who are my servants, but even among animals I prize it little less than goodness."

In still greater harmony with the classic view of the world, is the slight sadness which veils his optimism, a sadness that overshadows the joy of living, and comes from his realisation of the fact that all pleasures are but temporary and fleeting. From this realisation he makes an Epicurean deduction: "with all our strength, even with our teeth and feet, must we cling to the pleasures which one by one are being torn by years out of our very hands."

*Carpamus dulcia; nostra est.*

*Quod vivis, cinis, manes et fabula fiet.*

(Enjoy all pleasures, for they will be thine only so long as life remains; and soon wilt thou become ashes, shade and an empty voice.)

"Other men experience the sweets of happiness; I experience them as much as they, but not so fleetingly nor only once! I find it a delight to drink the cup of life to the last drop, to get drunk on it, and, so to say, to live afresh in it as far as possible, in order the more worthily to glorify Him Who has given us this happiness."

In his relation to death, moreover, as we have often seen, there is no trace of Christian

mysticism ; Death inspires him with nothing more than a graceful and rather superficial melancholy, as clear as the pensive melancholy charm of a still autumn evening. And here is the sentiment of the ancient Greek.

“The idea of death,” says Montaigne, “is the idea of liberty ; he who has learnt how to die, has unlearnt how to be a slave ; there is no evil in life for him who has understood that the absence of life is not an evil. The thought of death and the power to regard it calmly free us from all fetters. As to myself, I am not melancholy by nature, but rather pensive ; I ponder on death more frequently than I do on any other subject, even in the most joyous and flourishing moments of my life. Surrounded by fair damsels, or even in the midst of social gaieties, I oftimes sit distracted and silent ; my friends think that I am in love, or dreaming, whereas there has suddenly come into my head the thought of the death of one of my friends who but a few days ago had fallen ill all suddenly of a fever, at a similar entertainment, while perfectly cheerful, and dreaming of love as I myself am doing at this moment,—and some one whispers in my ear:



*Jam fuerit, nec post unquam revocare licebit.*

(The moment has gone by, nor has any man the power to recall it.)

But such thoughts did not make the expression of my face any sadder. "We are born to activity."

*Quum moriar, medium solvar et inter opus.*

(I desire to die working.)

"We must be actively employed up to the last moment, accomplishing all that life demands of us. I hope that death may surprise me in the garden when I am planting cabbages, and am occupied in such a way that I shall care little about the end, and still less for that which I am being called upon to quit."

Even in old age, in spite of illness, sufferings and the approach of death, Montaigne retained this view of life. Thus at the end of his essays he says :

"So much the more art thou a God,  
In that thou dost recognise that thou art a man."

*(D'autant es tu Dieu, comme  
Tu te reconnois homme.)*

"In this lies the highest, almost divine perfection—to know how to make lawful use of one's own existence. It seems to me that the best life is that which corresponds with the

average well-proportioned human form, and does not differ from it in any details or wondrous attributes. As for us old men, we deserve to be treated with some tenderness. We attain to our old age by the aid of that God who is the protector of health and wisdom, who is joyous and generous. ‘Apollo, I prithee grant that with undiminished strength and healthy mind I may enjoy that which is mine, and meet old age with no bitterness, in unimpaired enjoyment of the sweet-toned songs.’”

The thirst for simplicity, for a return to Nature, increases in degree in proportion as the life of a civilised man becomes more artificial and farther removed from the lives of the masses of the people. Rousseau is habitually regarded as the original idealist of primitive existence, but as a matter of fact he did no more than revive and bring back to our lives the teaching which we find still quite roughly expressed in Montaigne.

The sceptic of the sixteenth century starts on the hypothesis that the very least development of civilised life drives every country to an internal transformation and a moral decay. “Experience has shown us that, in Sparta as

in all other similar governments, the study of the arts not only does not strengthen and augment the bravery of the citizens, but on the contrary, it weakens and lowers their virility. To my mind, Rome was more powerful when she was less cultured. This results from the fact that art and civilisation care only for external beauty, and give men neither actual happiness nor any real knowledge of life. Frankly speaking, men of science are completely lacking in all simplicity of thought. Peasants and bootmakers quite simply and naïvely instruct others in that of which they themselves have some knowledge, whereas learned men, who desire to show the depth of their information, which is really very slight and superficial, are always getting into embarrassments, and falling at every turn into hopeless confusion.

“The wise men of to-day are like ears of corn in a field; so long as they are empty, they proudly and boldly raise their heads to the sky; but when filled with the ripened grains of corn, they begin humbly to bend down to the ground. So also are men; they probe all things, they penetrate everywhere, and finding nothing in this whole great wealth

of knowledge and wisdom, nothing sound, nothing eternal, nothing at all but vanity, they abandon their pride, and recognise their human weakness.”

In this respect animals have an immense advantage over men. Their invincible inborn instinct permits them not to swerve from their happy primitive condition. Montaigne idealizes the unconscious instinct of animals, and sets it above the “vain foolish” mind of man, which violates and transgresses the wise and perfect laws of Nature. “To lead a well ordered life, in accordance with the normal and inevitable dictates of one’s nature ; is not this indeed more noble, more lofty, more nearly calculated to raise us to God than to live under the guidance of our own arbitrary and insolent caprices? Is it not preferable to hand over to Nature the entire control and power over our own selves?

He at the same time idealises and describes in the most vivid rainbow colours the original condition of the American savages, of whom Europe was at that time only just beginning to have any knowledge. The discovery of the New World, and the involuntary parallel which it suggested between the civilisation

of the ancient European nations and the young uncultured races, gave a very powerful impulse to a natural reaction, and to the patriarchal life in Nature. Moreover, disillusion as to the benefits of civilisation had already partly shown themselves even in the antique world, as for instance in the teaching of the cynics, in the pastoral novels and bucolic poetry of the Roman and Greek writers of the period of decay. Montaigne makes use of the existence of the newly discovered red-skinned savages in order to restore to literature this primitive impulse: "I find," says he, "nothing barbarous in savage races; we are all of us accustomed to call barbarism that which does not harmonize with the traditions of our own country. We have indeed nothing else by which to measure truth and sense, but the generally accepted opinions and habits of the place in which we were born; there alone, and nowhere else do we find what we consider the perfection of order, the best religion and the most perfect morality. And yet these races are as wild as fruits which Nature has nurtured only by her own care, without the aid of any man. We are accustomed to call wild those fruits which

have grown up before they lost their original form and taste, in consequence of our artificial care ; whereas in the primitive, that is to say in the really wild fruit, there exists a vigorous and genuine germ of life, which is useful and of real worth, but which we have perverted, in order to indulge our own decadent taste. The fruits of these far distant lands possess an aroma and delicacy of taste such as are never met with in our European fruits. No, men of science can never receive the palm of primogeniture in its rivalry with our great and powerful mother, Nature. We have so spoiled the beauty and luxuriance of her products by our wretched inventions, that we have at length completely lost sight of her. And yet wherever Nature succeeds in shining forth in her own full glory, she at once confounds all the insignificant and foolish efforts of man. . . . Our art is a bad attempt at reproducing the nest of the most diminutive of birds, its structure, beauty and complete formation, or the web of some tiny spider."

Thus then Montaigne paints the happy condition of the American savages : "Natural laws, which have been distorted by man, govern them in their pure simplicity. The happiness

of these people seems to bring back to me not only the most enchanting pictures of the golden age, as described in poetry, and glorious visions of human happiness, but even the loftiest aims and requirements of wisdom itself. To this day no man can conceive of such pure and complete simplicity and innocence as we encounter among this people, not in imagination only, but in actual life also. They have no art and no sciences, no servants and no lords, no officials, no wealth, no poverty, no conventions, no inheritance nor partitions, and no occupations at all beyond eating . . . The very words which express a lie, treason, dissimulation, stupidity, crime, calumny, remissness, are unknown to them. How far apart is the ideal republic of Plato from their perfection! *Viri a diis recentes*—‘These are men who have but just come from the hands of the gods.’” It is remarkable that Montaigne is in no wise disillusioned by the following trait, for instance, which he recognised as being characteristic of the existence of savages. “Having killed their captive enemy, they cook and eat him, while they send a piece of the flesh to their absent friends. And

this they do not out of greed, in order to satiate themselves, but in order to carry their hatred to its uttermost degree." This does not horrify him, because in the terrors of the Inquisition and the horrors of the religious wars of his own time he has examples of sufficiently revolting misdeeds, all perpetrated in the name of God. To eat a conquered dead man is in his eyes not by any means so criminal as it is to subject a living creature to brutal torture. Nature has endowed the savages with all they require; we, civilised men, have rejected this natural and blessed assistance, "just as we exchange the light of day for artificial illumination, so also do we change our own powers for borrowed ones." "The examples of animals have shown us sufficiently by now that the majority of human ills result from the uncertain attitude of our minds. The long lives of the savages of Brazil, of whom it is related that they die only of old age, are accounted for by the moderate temperature and softness of the climate; though I should prefer to attribute it to the moderation and gentleness of their souls, to which all passion is strange, as are all thoughts or occupations



that are too hard or tiresome for them, seeing that they lead lives of great simplicity and wondrous vigour, without science, without laws, without government and without religion." These last words are characteristic of Montaigne's manner of describing the happiness of savage races, in his rejection of the chief foundations of the life of civilisation.

This criticism of the social structure of his time, concealed though it be under the idealisation of a natural condition, is brought out especially by Montaigne in the following story of three representatives of a certain savage American race, who chanced to be at Rouen during a visit of the French King Charles IX. to that city.

"The King had a long conversation with them. They were informed of our customs and our luxury, and were shewn the sights of our rich and beautiful city. At last some one asked one of them what he thought of what they had seen, and what had struck them most of all. They replied that three things had especially astonished them, one of which I have unfortunately forgotten. The other two were these: in the first place they confessed that it seemed most extraordinary and

incomprehensible to them how such tall and strong and bearded and well-developed men could submit themselves to a child-king, and why they did not choose out some more worthy leader. In the second place they noticed among us men who were rich and sated with all manner of luxury, while the remainder of the nation was composed of beggars, who were perishing from hunger and want; and they considered it strange to the last degree that the poorer portion of the people should endure such injustice, instead of throwing themselves upon the rich and killing them, and burning their dwellings." Montaigne leaves this passage without any comment; but the author's opinion of the reply of the Indians is perfectly plain: in spite of all his own practical conservatism, he cannot refrain from sympathising with the *naïve* surprise of those whom he himself calls "viri a diis recentes."

The idealisation of savages has rendered no small service to European society in this respect, that it has cleared and prepared the way for an attentive and sympathetic attitude towards the life of the masses. Montaigne's sympathy with primitive man proceeds

directly from his idealisation of primal conditions. In fact the philosopher proceeds from a fantastic portrayal of the happiness of savages and cannibals (thus he calls the redskins) to studies of the life of the people. "I have seen in my time," says he, "hundreds of farmers and workmen wiser and happier than the rectors of universities, and more worthy of respect." "I find that the words and deeds which men learn from nature are more in accordance with the prescriptions of true philosophy than the words and deeds of our recognised philosophers; *plus sapit vulgus, quia tantum, quantum opus est, sapit.*" ("The common people are wise because they know just as much as they require.") "Among simple people," he observes in another place, "one often meets with the symptoms of surprising goodness."

*Extrema per illos*

*Justitia excendens terris vestigia fecit.*

(Justice taking her flight from the earth has found a last refuge among these men.)

We must remember the original attitude of Montaigne in order to understand how he was able to reach his final deductions, and sing the praises of happy ignorance and to

advocate the complete rejection of science. "I have no doubts," says the philosopher, "as to the greatness and wealth of nature, nor do I deny her kindly methods of instruction to us; and I perceive that the swallow and the lark are fully satisfied with her. My doubts lie in the inventions of our own minds, in science and in art, in the name of which, transgressing all moderation, we have abandoned Nature and violated her laws." Hence he comes to the conclusion that all knowledge is harmful. This conclusion loses its paradoxical character if we press it closely, for the "knowledge" of which Montaigne had the image before his eyes, that is to say the dead scholasticism of the Middle Ages, was indeed in many ways more evil than entire ignorance. He adduces the examples of St. Paul, the Roman Emperors Valentinianus and Licinius, and of Mahomet, as men who have denied the uses of knowledge and of science, and he is in entire agreement with them. "He who will judge us according to our acts and impulses, will find a greater number of good men among the ignorant than among the learned." The philosopher Pyrrho, when caught by a storm

at sea, pointed out to his disciples, who were in agonies of terror, the quiet demeanour of a little pig which they had on board, and which was gazing at the water without a trace of fear. "Philosophy, when all is said and done, sends us back to the example of some athlete or mule-driver, who suffer as a rule much less from the fear of death, from physical illness and other misfortunes, than men who are striving to attain this same end by means of science, but who are not endowed with the requisite qualifications." Montaigne divines that in the actual artist and scholar there is more in common with the simple man who is close to nature, than there is in the narrow, self-sufficient doctrinaire. "Simple men are honest men," says he; "philosophers, deep and powerful natures, endowed with broad and useful knowledge, are also honest men. But those who form themselves into an exclusive circle, despising ignorance in others without themselves attaining to the highest wisdom, are dangerous, stupid, and contemptible." Popular poetry (Montaigne was the first to invent this expression) is essentially imbued with *naïveté* and grace, which enable it to take a place beside

the highest productions of the most finished poetry. One need only turn to the pleasing Gascon songs and the poetical works of those savage tribes who have no acquaintance with the science of art, nor even with the art of writing. Mediæval poetry, which comes between this and popular poetry, and which reaches the perfection of genius, has no true worth or merit. This idea of the connection between genius and the common people is repeated again in another place—through storms a middle zone is reached; both are at opposite poles; philosophers and the people rivalling one another in reposeful happiness and calm.

Montaigne is above all captivated by the power of the people's soul, which is more especially shown in primitive man's Stoic attitude towards death. What heroism and endurance the common people have shown at times of religious excitement, during the religious and civil strife of that period. What proofs of unexampled valour have we seen among the common people! Nearly all of them have renounced the preservation of their own lives; the principal wealth of the land, the grape, hangs unplucked upon

its branch. With what complete indifference does each one prepare himself for a death, which they expect to-night or to-morrow morning, while their countenances and conversation remain as peaceful as though they had long since schooled themselves to face the inevitable, and were only awaiting the fulfilment of some impending social sentence. Look at them: though their children are dying, and the young men and the old as well, they remain unmoved and do not weep. I have met with some who feared to outlive their comrades and remain in miserable solitude, and I noticed that their one and only desire was for the grave." Montaigne reveres this life so full of faith and vigour. In each one of us is concealed this same strength, but we have disfigured and weakened it by our reasoning doctrinairism and so-called imaginative development. "Dive into yourselves," says he, "and you will find in your hearts true and imperishable weapons against death; those same ones which enable a simple man and a whole nation to die as calmly as the greatest philosophers can die." "To what end do we arm ourselves with the weapons of vain knowledge? Let us look

down upon the ground; poor people are dispersed over it, with their heads bowed down from work, who know nothing of Aristotle nor of Cato, nor of examples nor of teaching, and yet every day Nature shows us among them loftier and more astonishing examples of Stoicism and patient endurance than any that history can point out to us. What numbers of men do I find among them understanding how to bear poverty with indifference, to await death calmly, with neither trepidation nor grief! Look at that workman digging up the soil in my garden now—he was, may be, this very morning burying his father or his son. The very names for diseases among the people somehow soften them and make them lighter; phthisis they call a cough, and dysentery a derangement of the stomach; pleurisy, a chill; and in accordance with these soothing names they bear their illnesses quietly: they must be very ill indeed if their illness prevents them from returning to their work; they only retire to bed when the moment has come for them to die.”

“We have examined Nature, and desire to instruct her in various ways; her who has



led us along such a happy and hopeful path. But at the same time wisdom has herself been forced to borrow our conceptions of courage, innocence and peace from the rough class of common labourers, who, thanks to their ignorance, have managed still to retain some feeling for and reflection of Nature's beneficent influence. Is it not strange that men of science, though imbued with the deepest knowledge, should have to imitate this stupid simplicity, and especially so in the most important questions, in life and in death, in the preservation of their property, and in love, in the education of their children, and in their sense of justice."

"The wisest thing to do is to resign oneself in all simplicity to Nature. Oh! what sweet, what noble, and what tender pillows for the heads of the elect are ignorance and simplicity of heart!"



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The life-work of Montaigne

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